"BEAUTY, SOCIETY AND THE BEAST"

(The Effect of Fairy Tales on Socialization)

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Introduction

There is no universally accepted definition of Fairy Tales. Infact the exact definition has been a matter of debate for a very long time. A fairy tale can be described as a subtype of folktale where it tends to be the longest, most descriptive and most complicated compared with other types of folktales. For example, the story of Cinderella is a fairy tale as it has all the extremely detailed description even in the earliest form.

In spite of their name, fairy tales had very little to do with fairies. Once upon a time, they were not written for children and were originally a form of adult entertainment told at social gatherings and other settings where adults would meet. Due to this reason these tales included exhibitionism, rape and voyeurism. For instance the tale of Little Red Riding Hood consisted of little red riding hood getting raped by the wolf. Another story, Sun, Moon and Talia (Sleeping Beauty) written by Giambattista Basile in 1634 had the prince raping the princess (Talia) in her sleep and leaving her pregnant.

As time went by there was a change in the intended audience. Charles Perrault's collection of tales were written to be presented at the court of Versailles. All these stories had a moralistic value. Inventive tales of great imagination were also created

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by women, rebelling against the constraints placed on them by society. These tales were often cruel and gruesome. It was only in the nineteenth century that the fairy tales were made into children's stories. One may wonder how these stories became children's stories. It is believed that peddlers known as 'chapmen', travelled from town to town and sold affordable little books called 'chapbooks'. The tales in these 'chapbooks' were drastically edited and simplified for less literate audiences.

Universally fairy tales are all about wonder and enchantment consisting of supernatural and magical beings and also speak about situations that would not otherwise happen in real life, for example, animals talking to humans. Most importantly the tale always ends with the hero and heroine living happily ever after. As we can see these stories were meant to entertain. Mostly stories with genies, ogres, imps, wizards, brownies, witches, sorcerers or fairies are all fairy tales. Fairy tales contain both cautionary messages as well as negative messages. They also contain misleading stereotypes and images. For instance, they do not provide positive images about groups who are not white, middleclass or heterosexual. As we can see in all these stories that 'ugly characters with kind hearts are hard to find'.

The Grimm Brothers from Germany, Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm wrote some of the most popular fairy tales like Cinderella, Snow White, Sleeping Beauty (also known as Briar Rose), Little Red Riding Hood (also known as Little Red Cap) and Hansel & Gretel. These were written in the early 19th century and later translated into English in 1851. The brothers collected folktales of the German people to make up their volume.

Charles Perrault in France originally wrote Cinderella in 1697. His version was known as 'Cendrillon'.

Originally fairy tales had always been tied in with women's wisdom and power. These tales outlined social functions and places, which saw the virtuous rewarded, and adversity overcome. Later, tales by the Grimm Brothers and Charles Perrault were written to favor the charming prince rather than the clever heroine. Psychoanalysis from the Freudian viewpoint has considered Cinderella's relationship to her father and her stepmother and her eventual overtaking of power from the stepmother.

Many of the stories were edited and changed as they were written down removing the darker and more gruesome elements of the stories resulting in the evolution of traditional fairy tales, which will continue as a trend.

As long as there have been civilizations, there have been stories that are told to children. This story telling is a means of not only comforting and amusing the

child, but teaching the child the societal norms - these tales are memorized by children and remembered forever. Children tend to idolize their favourite characters, the character they have most in common with and are best able to identify with, and try to emulate that character's actions. From these fairy tales, children learn proper etiquette and the role they should play in society. What actions are good and what actions are bad are clearly displayed. By the means of these stories, cultural beliefs can be passed on from one generation to another. However, this imparting of societal rules through fairy tales can be used to manipulate and brainwash children into continuing the dominance of a group.

The Feministic Approach to Fairy Tales

Feminist sociological research methodologies are based on women's lived experiences in patriarchy, gender as socially constructed and historically specific, and on a political commitment to the emancipation of women. Feminist researchers seek to make visible the lived experiences of women and the research and writing process within social sciences generally and within feminist social science in particular. Feminist researchers often deal with dilemmas that have no absolute solutions.

Majority of the people of the world grow up listening to, watching or reading fairy tales. Fairy tales are often used to teach children important values and principles. They are associated with our childhood and imbedded into our collective memory in some form or another. Fairy tales are used to teach young children morals. However, these tales instill negative stereotypes of girls, reinforce racism and expose children to strong sexual innuendos.

Kay F. Stone in her essay "Feminist approaches to the interpretation of Fairy Tales" talks about three schools of feminist criticism of fairy tales.

1. The first school of thought talks about how fairy tales are considered as a socializing force that discourage females from realizing their full human potential. This early school of thought relied on the assumption that "women are separated from and wrongly considered unequal to men".

2. The second school of feminists, views fairy tales with, "happily ever after ending" as a source of dreams, hopes and fantasies of generations and generations of young girls. Thus, "Prince Charming" is the villain who the girls foolishly await for! Feminists such as Marcia K. Lieberman and Karen Rowe belong to this school. This school strives on the assumption that "women were naturally separate from men and rightly superior".

3. Marie Louise Von Franz and Madonna Kolbenschalg belong to the third school of feminism. They rely on the assumption that "men and women are separate but equal if men shape up".

Liz Grauerholz (an associate professor of sociology), Lori Baker Sperry (an assistant professor of women's studies at Western Illinois University) and a former Purdue graduate conducted studies on fairy tales and how they reinforce traditional gender roles.

"Fairy tales say it pays to be pretty". Such a statement proves to be confusing especially during a time when women are encouraged to be independent and rely on their brains than beauty. Hence, women today still tend to value beauty and appearance. Such thoughts have been deeply influenced by fairy tales, according to which princesses achieve vast riches simply because their beauty makes them worth it all.

The Grimm's fairy tales emphasis on beauty and even more on the beauty of women. "In Cinderella, the most reproduced of the Grimm's fairy tales, beauty in women was referred to 114 times. The stories don't focus as much on the appearance of the male characters, with less than 35 references in each tale, according to the study."

There is a double standard for the women in the Grimm's fairly tale Bearskin. According to Marcia K. Lieberman, heroines in fairy tales are reduced to a state of passivity, submissiveness and helplessness.

In the tale - Bearskin, a poor man has three daughters. This man owes a debt to Bearskin. He decided to exchange one of his daughters as a deal so as to clear the debt. Two of his daughters "assertively reject" Bearskin for his "almost inhuman condition". However, Bearskin is only a façade and is indeed a gallant warrior. It seems, that the sisters have every right to reject him. The leading female character in Bearskin (the poor man's third daughter) agrees to wait passively for three years in order to marry Bearskin to fulfill a debt owed by her father.

The female heroine is not only reduced to submissiveness, but also to an object displaying the father's gratitude to Bearskin. Also, at the end of the tale, it is seen that the sisters who rejected Bearskin lose their souls and are banished in hell. This shows that "assertiveness" does not suit a woman and she has hardly any right to be bold, ambitious and selective!

Fairy tales are full of negative stereotypes of girls. In fairy tales, men are strong, smart and in power. Women are pretty, passive and powerless. The women depend solely on a man to save them in their lives.

For example, Cinderella - the beautiful and naïve girl is cruelly treated by her *ugly* stepmother and sisters and eventually is rescued by a handsome prince whom she is able to live happily ever after with.

Even in Hansel and Gretel, it is always Hansel who comes up with the plans to save himself and his sister. "Hearing these messages from fairy tales, that were created by an old-patriarchal society may cause women, especially young girls to withdraw from activities or careers, such as competitive sports or hard labour because it is not part of being feminine."

Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Mermaid" teach girls that looks are all that matters in life. In this tale, Ursula - the evil sea witch actually tells Ariel - the little mermaid, "Men up there don't like a lot of blabber, and they think a girl who talks is a bore. But don't worry, you have your looks, your pretty face and don't forget about your body language." Ariel, apart from losing her voice wins the love of her Prince Charming! This tale sends across a very troubling message according to which-with the aid of beauty and feat can be achieved.

Powerful messages sent across by fairy tales emphasis on beauty. This perception of the female "race", in a way controls girls and women. The concept of patri-lineality is also induced by fairy tales. It is observed that in fairy tales it is always the bride who goes away from her home to her husband's or the groom's. Fairy tales include notions or both patriarchy as well as patri-lineality.

Now we will discuss in more detail the perception of beauty and the influence laid on it by fairy tales.

Perception of Beauty

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever ..." - true to this quote, the changing society today still demands for beauty in abundance. A trend as you may call it, the fact remains that physical features hold a comparatively more important position today. This automatically implies the statement that beauty is important. Society as a whole has evolved drastically on all fronts. The specific strata of the society which believed in the 'beauty first' slogan has now amalgamated itself with the rest thereby bringing about a change, a revolution in the thoughts and opinions of others.

Why is that such a trend has taken place? Why, from being their normal innocent selves have people come into a state of mind where the beat of both the worlds holds a place above the rest? Yes, the answer lies right before us and still it isn't visualized by our eyes - the media, books, films, TV serials and let's just get back to the past and think about the fairy tales which right from the beginning of the tender age of our childhood have given us the impression that beauty is virtuous. There would be very few who wouldn't believe with us in the fact that since time immemorial, the fairy tales have idolized the beautiful damsel and given a face of horror to the ugly and dreaded. The fore mentioned statement would sound even clearer with a few examples. The first and probably the most important fairy tale of all times is Cinderella, a classic tale intertwining innocence, honesty, modesty and YES, beauty. As the tale unfolds the climax shows a majestic display of how the timid, meek and beautiful Cinderella gets her prince charming above her fashionable but ugly, wicked step sisters in the end. Here again beauty has been given greater importance and the ugly have faced the wrath.

People today, despite increasing independence for many still tend to value beauty and appearance on the more common and real life basis. Take for instance the matrimonial columns in the newspapers - Almost all of them include the words 'beauty' 'fair' & 'good looking'. This is because people believe that socially and domestically they need to live up to the standards and the looks of the 'society'.

Why is that attractive women are socially rewarded more than unattractive people? In many cultures beauty is the basis for many decisions. Most often the beautiful person will be chosen over the ugly or homely for a position or prize. Beauty since the beginning has been associated with intelligence, ability, kindness and morality. That is why young maidens are 'virtuous' and get to marry the handsome and powerful.

Finally the message that is given to girls is that beauty is the most important trait for females in our society. There may be many other things, but you are very much expected to be beautiful and to spend the time that is necessary to achieve that. Boys don't get the message as much as girls that it is very important to be handsome although most of the princes are. Adolescent girls seeking beauty develop eating disorders and go through plastic and cosmetic surgery spending exorbitant amounts of money and time and also risking the quality of life. The pre-occupation of beauty can become dangerous. It also contributes to the perception of women, girls and their look, by men.

Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder .... Keeping up with the pace of the 21st century the quote can be rephrased as outward physical beauty lies in the eyes of

the beholder. The society now plays blind to the inner beauty. Therefore to conclude - the best bottom line would be that whether we notice or not…. "beauty holds today".

Fairy Tales - Not So Happily Ever After

This section explores the reality behind the phrase "happily ever after", every little girl's dream that may ultimately turn out to be her worst nightmare as a woman. What little girl has ever grown up not imagining that someday she might marry the prince? The fairy tales they hear as little girls shape their fantasies as women - not just about having a rich, handsome husband but also a lavish lifestyle, a sprawling mansion and every other luxury known to man. They form expectations of happiness and as they grow up, some of those expectations stick with them, no matter how outwardly realistic or feminist they pride themselves in being. Ominously, as they come to the part of the story that always reads "… and they lived happily ever after", they begin to realize that a whole bunch of details have been omitted about how you actually manage to live happily ever after with princes who, it turns out, may be don't love you enough with all the pressure and power of family or just don't love you at all.

Several researchers have gone beyond the ending to ask questions such as "What happens after that?" Margaret Peterson Haddix, a renowned author and newspaper reporter, has put together several versions of Cinderella and what happens after she meets Prince Charming. It's a familiar story: In spite of the obstacles put in her way by her wicked stepmother, Cinderella goes to the ball, sweeps Prince Charming off his feet, and is chosen to be his bride. Now she's comfortably ensconced in the palace, awaiting marriage to the man of her dreams. It's happily ever after time, right?

Wrong! First, she learns that her prince's beautiful blue eyes and golden hair are attached to a head with nothing in it and the only thing charming about her prince is his name. She also has to undergo tedious training in etiquette. Life turns out to be an endless round of lessons and restrictions. Slowly she comes to realize she doesn't want the life she fought so hard to win. Then she meets tutor Jed Reston, a lively companion, their relationship inspires her to rethink her wishes and priorities and to embark on a challenging quest to find true happiness in life and love. This aftermath story that touches on many contemporary themes including the components of love and happiness, the unimportance of physical appearance and how young girls are manipulated by society's images of beauty. Haddix's take on the story breathes fresh air into a rather superficial ending.

The earliest known written version of Sleeping Beauty was actually published by an Italian named Giambattista Basile. Sleeping Beauty, one of the most classic fairy tales ever told is a beautiful tale in which they all live happily ever after. Or do they? The original story, according to sources, is NOT a tale of happily ever after but actually contains very cruel and downright nasty elements such as rape and cannibalism. The so-called 'noble' prince who rescues her turns out to be not so noble in the end.

The shocking renderings of these seemingly innocent tales we heard, as kids sadly don't project reality as it is. Probably the most unstereotypical of them in actual life is the real life saga of Prince Charles and Lady Diana, where the entire world expected a fairy tale life for them. Unfortunately Charles was not so charming with all his royal duties and preoccupations and also the factor of the other woman being present in his life. Poor Diana who probably dreamed of a beautiful life after marriage was devastated after all this. She suffered from bulimia and paranoia and looked everywhere for happiness. And as some say maybe she only got it after her death.

When the reality of marriage doesn't meet our expectations we tend to blame reality. When it comes to marriage, we expect the fairy tale. Rise on Cinderella and Snow-White, we're convinced that marriage will solve all of our problems, our partner will meet all our needs, and that we'll live happily ever after. But many of us don't get the last part, the happily-ever-after part; instead we get divorced. So where did we go wrong and how do fairy tales fit in?

Mary Laner, a professor of sociology at Arizona State University, studied the marital expectations of unmarried college students. She compared their expectations with those of people who have been married for about 10 years. The significantly higher expectations held by the students, she says, come straight out of the "happily ever after" fantasy. "Such irrationality can lead us to conclude that when the thrill is gone, or when the marriage or partner doesn't live up to our inflated ideals, divorce or abandonment of the marriage in some other forms is the solution," Laner says.

In fact the divorce rate in the United States is just over half of the marriage rate. Many researchers, including Laner, lay at least part of the blame for this statistic on those unrealistic expectations. She adds, "many of us continue to take our zealous idea of what marriage should be into the next relationship and the next, and so on. Even second and later marriages have higher divorce rate than do first marriages. As far as expectations are concerned, this may be a reflection of the primacy of hope over experience, followed once again by disillusionment."

Further, we will discuss the various other misconceptions and stereotypes influenced by fairy tales.

Stereotypes

Fairy tales are important historically because they provide children with information about a certain period. What they don't do is provide positive images about groups who are not white, middle class or heterosexual.

Fairy tales are full of implications of racism. The Disney movie Aladdin is an important example because it was a high profile release, the winner of two Academy Awards, and one of the most successful Disney movies ever made. The movie begins with the song "Arabian Nights," which is filled with Arab stereotypes. The lines "Oh I come from a land from a far away place where the caravan camels roam. Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face. It's barbaric, but hey it's home." Offended many people after its movie release. Disney changed the line "Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face" to "Where it's flat and immense and the heat is intense". In Aladdin all of the bad guys have beards and large, bulbous noses, sinister eyes and heavy accents. Aladdin, on the other hand doesn't have a big nose, he has a small nose. He doesn't have a beard or turban. He doesn't have an accent. This portrayal of Arab characters gives people a negative perception of Arabs. The Arab characters are mean and evil whereas those who speak clear English and appear to be Americanized are "socially accepted".

Racism is also evident in Disney's The Lion King. Scar, the evil lion, is darker than all of the other lions. While the members of the royal family speak with posh British accents, the hyenas, speak with accents of an urban black or Hispanic youth. This could portray their cultures as uneducated and unintelligent.

Minorities were often treated as outcast. In Grimm's "Snow White & the Seven Dwarfs," the seven dwarfs live in a secluded home far from the kingdom. Although they lived in peaceful co-existence it was obvious that it was due to their defects in their physical appearances that they lived a solitary life. "Rumpelstilskin" lived in hiding, as he was extremely ashamed of his "ugly" exterior. Anyone who deviated from the typical stereotype often led a life of solitude.

Another misleading stereotype depicted in fairy tales would be the portrayal of stepmothers. Stepmothers are often depicted as cruel and spiteful. They usually favor their own children (if they have any - as in Cinderella) and despise their stepchildren. A typical five years old would be terrified of having a stepmother.

Conclusion

In this article we have briefly looked at the origin and history of fairy tales, then we have spoken in greater detail about the feminist interpretation of these tales, the perception and importance of beauty and the idea of "happily ever after" in these stories.

Till this point we have tried to analyze several aspects of these tales, very often overlooked by adults and children. Ultimately these stories influence the way in which children perceive and understand the social world.

Fairy tales are in many ways a means to transmit the dominant ideology of a patriarchal society. They reinforce the norms and send important messages to children about so called "sex appropriate" behaviour. Minority groups are seldom, if ever represented as main characters in these stories. Somehow their perspective is always missing in fairy tales. In the end it is an extremely powerful tool to ensure conformity to the norms of the society.

As mentioned before fairy tales do more than merely offer children a fantasy world of magic. The important thing to keep in mind is that fairy tales are ultimately a tool for effective socialization. They therefore should be adaptive to fit the particular needs of a time period or a culture. Are these stories still sending the messages we want them to? If not we can and must change them.

Hopefully fairy tales will continue to evolve to include ordinary-looking or non-conventional characters as the heroines and heroes, as in the 2001 animated film "Shrek" whose happy ending has a beautiful princess turning into an ogre and leaving the prince at the altar. What is so interesting about "Shrek" is that it is the opposite of the "Ugly Duckling" story. The princess becomes the ogre in the end. The whole film in a way breaks down several stereotypes not only about the importance of beauty but also the gender roles. For example the princess is not merely a passive victim of circumstances but independent and as capable of defending herself as any male character in the film.

Finally we would like to conclude by mentioning a few of our ideas for the following assignment. In the next assignment we plan to interview a sample group consisting of children, adolescents and adults about the impact these stories have had on them. We will collect data on their ideas of gender appropriate behaviour, importance of physical attractiveness and their expectations about marriage and relationships. Then we will attempt to correlate these ideas with messages contained in these fairy tales.

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